The Story of The Sun 1833 to 1918

Moses Y. Beach Gets the Paper From Benjamin H. Day, Its Founder, Paying Only $40,000—How the Penny Sheet Revolutionized Journalism of Its Day Mightily

This is the fifth of a series of articles narrating the history of THE SUN, and giving a vital, intimate view of metropolitan life and journalism during more than eighty eventful years. The first article, printed four weeks ago, told of the founding of the paper by Benjamin H. Day, in September, 1833, and of its rapid rise to success. The second and third articles gave a full account of the memorable moon hoax, which made THE SUN famous all over the world; and the fourth continued the record to the date of the sale of the paper to its second proprietor, Moses Y. Beach, first announced in February, 1838.

By FRANK M. O'BRIEN.

ON June 15, 1837, the name of Benjamin H. Day, which had appeared at the masthead of THE SUN since its beginning, disappeared. In its place was the legend: "Published daily by the proprietor." This gave rise to a variety of rumors, and about a week later, on June 23, THE SUN said editorially:

Several of our contemporaries are in a maze of wonder because we have taken our beautiful cognomen from the imprint of THE SUN. Some of the loafers among them have even flattered themselves that our humble self in person had consequently disappeared. Not so, gentlemen—for though we may not be ambitious that our thirty thousand subscribers should daily pronounce our name while poring over advertisements on the first page, we nevertheless remain steadily at our post, and shall thus continue during the pleasure of a generous public, except, perchance, an absence of a few months on a trip to Europe, which we purpose to make this season.

With regard to a certain report that we had lost twenty thousand dollars by shaving notes, we have nothing to say. Our private business transactions cannot in the least interest the public at large.

Day's name never went back. The reason for its disappearance was a libel suit brought by a lawyer named Andrew S. Garr. On May 3, 1837, THE SUN printed a report of a case in the Court of Chancery in which it was incidentally mentioned that Garr had once been indicted for conspiracy to defraud. The reporter neglected to add that Garr had been acquitted. At the end of the article was the quotation:

When rogues get quarrelling the truth will out.

Garr sued Day for $10,000, and Day not only took his name from the top of the first column of the first page, but apparently made a wash sale of the newspaper.

The case was tried in February, 1838, and on the 16th of that month Garr got a verdict for $3,000—"to be extracted," as THE SUN said next morning, "from the right hand breeches pocket of the defendant, who about a year since ceased replenishing that fountain of the 'needful' from the prolific source of THE SUN'S rays by virtue of a total, unconditional and unrevisionary sale of the same to its present proprietor."

'The Sun' Is Sold to Moses Y. Beach

The name of that "present proprietor" was not given; but on June 28, 1838, the following notice appeared at the top of the first page:

Communications intended for THE SUN must be addressed to Moses Y. Beach, 156 Nassau street, corner of Spruce.

Day was really out of THE SUN then, after having been its master for five years lacking sixty-seven days, and the paper passed into the actual ownership of Beach, who had married Day's sister and who had acted as the bookkeeper of THE SUN almost from its inception. There were those, including Edgar Allan Poe, who believed that Beach was the boss of THE SUN even in the days of the moon hoax, but they were mistaken. The paper, as THE SUN itself remarked on December 4, 1835, was "altogether ruled by Benjamin H. Day."

"I owned the whole concern," said Mr. Day in 1883, "till I sold it to Beach. And the silliest thing I ever did in my life was to sell that paper!"

And why did Day sell, for forty thousand dollars, a paper which had the largest circulation in the world—about thirty thousand copies? The answer is that it was not paying as well as it had paid.

There were a couple of years when his profits had been as high as twenty thousand dollars. The net return for the six months ended October 1, 1836, as announced by THE SUN on April 19, 1837, was $12,981.88; but at the time when Day sold out THE SUN was about breaking even. The advertising, due to general dulness in business—for which the bank failures and the big fire were partly to blame—had fallen off. It was costing Day $300 a week more for operating expenses and materials than he got from the sales of newspapers, and the loss was barely made up by the advertising receipts. With what he had saved, and the $40,000 paid to him by Beach, he would have a comfortable fortune. He was only 28 years old, and there might be other worlds to conquer.

From nothing at all except his own industry and common sense Day had built up a business which THE SUN itself thus described a few days before the change of ownership:

Some idea of the business done in the little three story building at the corner of Nassau and Spruce streets occupied by THE SUN for the publication of a penny paper may be formed from the fact that the annual outlay for material and wages exceeds ninety-three thousand dollars—very nearly two thousand a week, and more than three hundred a day for the six working days. On this outlay we circulate daily thirty thousand papers. Allowing the other nine morning papers an average of three thousand circulation—which may fall short in two or three cases, while it is a large estimate for all the rest—it will appear that the circulation of THE SUN newspaper is daily more than of all the others united.

That this is not mere gasconade, but susceptible of proof, we refer the curious to the papermakers, who furnish the stock for this immense circulation; to the typefounders, who give us a new dress three times a year, and to the Messrs. Hoe & Co., who built our two double cylinder Napier presses, which throw off copies of THE SUN at the rate of four thousand copies per hour. We invite newspaper publishers to visit our establishment when the presses are in operation, and we shall be happy to show them what would have astonished Dr. Faust, with all his intimacy with a certain nil admirari potentate.

As for the influence of the paper among the people THE SUN dealt in no vain exaggeration when it said of itself a year before Day's departure:

Since THE SUN began to shine upon the citizens of New York there has been a very great and decided change in the condition of the laboring classes and the mechanics. Now every individual, from the rich aristocrat who lolls in his carriage to the humble laborer who wields a broom in the streets, reads THE SUN; nor can even a boy be found in New York city or the neighboring country who will not know in the course of the day what is promulgated in THE SUN in the morning.

Already can we perceive a change in the mass of the people. They think, talk and act in concert. They understand their own interest, and feel that they have numbers and strength to pursue it with success.

THE SUN newspaper has probably done more to benefit the community by enlightening the minds of the common people than all the other papers together.

Day's Great Achievement.

Day found New York journalism a pot of cold, stale water and left it a boiling, bubbling caldron, not so much by what he wrote as by the way in which he made his success. There were better newspaper men than Day before and during his time, plenty of them. They had knowledge and experience, they knew style, but they did not know the people. In their imagination the "gentle reader" was a male between the ages 35 and 90, with a burning interest in politics and a fancy that the universe revolved around either Andrew Jackson or Daniel Webster. Why write for any one who did not have fixed notions on the subject of the United States Bank or Abolition?

To the mind of the sixpenny editor the man who did not have six cents to spend was a negligible quantity. Nothing was worth printing unless it carried an appeal to the professional man or the merchant. It is likely that the managers of the blanket sheets knew what the people with a penny to spare would like to read, but it would have been undignified to let them have it.

The *Courier and Enquirer*, under Col. Webb, belched broadsides of old fashioned Democratic doctrine, and Webb hired the best men he could find to load the guns. He had Bennett, Noah, James K. Paulding and later Charles King and Henry J. Raymond. These were all good writers, most of them good newspaper men; but so far as the general public was concerned Col. Webb might as well have put them in a cage.

The *Journal of Commerce* was a great sixpenny, but it was not for the people to read. From 1828 until the civil war its editor was Gerard Hallock, an enterprising journalist who ran expensive horse expresses to Washington to get the proceedings of Congress, but would not admit that the public at large was more interested in a description of the murdered Helen Jewett's gowns than in a new currency bill. The clipper ships that lay off Sandy Hook to get the latest foreign news from the European vessels cost Hallock and Webb, who combined in this enterprise, $20,000 a year—probably more than they spent on all their local news.

In the solemn sanctum of the *Evening Post* William Cullen Bryant and William Leggett wrote scholarly verse and free trade editorials. They were live men, but their newspaper steed was slow. Leggett could urge Bryant to give a beating to Stone, the editor of the *Commercial Advertiser*, and he himself fought a duel with Blake, the treasurer of the Park Theatre; but these great men had little steam when it came to making a popular newspaper. The great editors were of a cult. They revolved around one another, too far aloft for the common eye.

Charles King was the most conservative of them all. He was a son of Rufus King, Senator from New York and Minister to England, and he was editor of the *American*, an evening sixpenny, from 1827 to 1845. He lacked nothing in scholarship, but his paper was miserably dull and rarely circulated more than a thousand copies. He remained at his editorial desk for four years after the *American* was absorbed by the *Courier and Enquirer*, and then he became president of Columbia College, a place better suited to him.

Such were the men who ruled the staid, prosy and expensive newspapers of New York when Day and his penny SUN popped up. Most of them are better known to fame than Day is, but not one of them did anything comparable to the young printer's achievement in making a popular, low priced daily newspaper—and not only making it but making it stick. For Day started something that went rolling on, increasing in size and weight until it controlled the thought of the continent. Day was the Columbus, THE SUN was the egg. Anybody could do the trick—after Day showed how simple it was.

Bennett and his *Herald* were the first to profit by the example of the young Yankee printer. It should have been easy for Bennett, yet he had already failed at the same undertaking. He was at work in the newspaper field of New York as early as 1824, nine years before Day started THE SUN. He failed as proprietor of the *Sunday Courier* (1825), and he failed again with the Philadelphia *Pennsylvanian*. He had a wealth of experience as assistant to Webb and as the Washington correspondent of the *Enquirer*.

It was no doubt due to the success of THE SUN that Bennett, after two failures, established the *Herald*. He saw the human note that Ben Day had struck, and he knew, as a comparatively old newspaper man—he was forty when he started the *Herald*—what mistakes Day was making in the neglect of certain news fields, such as Wall Street. But the value of the penny paper Day had already proved, and Day had established, ahead of everybody else, the newsboy system, by which the man in the street could get a paper whenever he liked without making a yearly investment.

Bennett may have written the constitution of popular journalism, but it was Day who wrote its declaration of independence. If it had not been for the untrained Day, fifteen years younger than Bennett, it is possible that there would have been no *Herald* to span nearly a century under the ownership of father and son.

It has been said of Bennett that he discovered that "a paper universally denounced will be read." Day learned that much a year before the *Herald* was started. Day was sensational, and he seemed to court the written assaults of the sixpenny editors. Bennett also sought abuse, and did not care when it brought physical pain with it. He was still more sensational than Day. If there was nothing else, his own personal affairs were made the public's property. He was about to marry, so the *Herald* printed this:

TO THE READERS OF THE HERALD—Declaration of Love—Caught at Last—Going to be Married—New Movement in Civilization.

My ardent desire has been through life to reach the highest order of human excellence by the shortest possible cut. Association, night and day, in sickness and in health, in war and in peace, with a woman of the highest order of excellence must produce some curious results in my heart and feelings, and these results the future will develop in due time in the columns of the *Herald*. Meantime I return my heartfelt thanks for the enthusiastic patronage of the public, both of Europe and America. The holy estate of wedlock will only increase my desire to be still more useful. God Almighty bless you all.

JAMES GORDON BENNETT.

James Parton described Bennett as "a man of French intellect and Scotch habits." Bennett was not of Scottish blood, his parents being of French descent, but his youth in Scotland, where he was born, probably impregnated him with the thrift of his environment. He established the no credit system in the *Herald* business office. Probably he had observed that Col. Webb had lost a fortune in unpaid subscriptions and advertisements.

Bennett was a good business man and an energetic editor. He used all the ideas that Day had proved profitable, and many of his own. Perhaps the most valuable thing he learned from Day was that it was unwise to be a slave to a political party. But his own experience with the luckless *Pennsylvanian*, a Jackson organ, may have convinced him of the futility of the strictly partisan paper, which neglected the news for the sake of the office holders.

Day's success with THE SUN was responsible for the birth not only of the *Herald* but of a host of American penny papers, which sprang up at the rate of a dozen a year. Of the New York imitators the *Jeffersonian*, published by Childs & Devoe, and the *Man*, owned by George H. Evans, an Englishman who was the Henry George of his day, were not long for this world. The *Transcript*, started in 1834, flashed up for a time as a dangerous rival of THE SUN. Three compositors, William J. Stanley, Willoughby Lynde and Billings Hayward, owned it. Its editor was Asa Greene, erstwhile physician and bookseller and always humorist. He wrote "The Adventures of Dr. Dodimus Duckworth," "The Perils of Pearl Street" and "The Travels of Ex-Barber Fribbelton in America"—this last a travesty on the books of travel turned out by Englishmen who visited the States.

William H. Attree, a former compositor, wrote the *Transcript's* lively police court stories, THE SUN'S rival having learned how popular was crime. The *Transcript* lasted five years, the earlier of them so prosperous that the proprietors thought they were going to be millionaires. But Reporter Attree went to Texas with the land boomers, and Lynde, who wrote the paragraphs, died. When the paper failed, in 1839, Hayward went to the *Herald*, where he worked as a compositor all the rest of his life.

The other penny papers that sprang up in New York to give battle—while the money lasted—to THE SUN, the *Transcript* and the *Herald* were the *True Sun*, started by some of Day's discharged employees; the *Morning Star*, run by Major Noah of the *Evening Star*; the *New Era*, already mentioned, which Richard Adams Locke started in 1836 in company with Jared D. Bell and Joseph Price; the *Daily Whig*, of which Horace Greeley was Albany correspondent in 1838; the *Bee*, the *Serpent*, the *Light*, the *Express*, the *Union*, the *Rough Hewer*, the *New Times*, the *Examiner*, the *Morning Chronicle*, the *Evening Chronicle*, the *Daily Conservative*, the *Censor* and the *Daily News*. All these bobbed up, in one city alone, in the five years during which Ben Day owned THE SUN.

As to the *True Sun*, there were at various times four or five publications put out under that name.

Most of them were mushrooms in origin and morning glories by nature. They could not stand THE SUN'S rays.

Notable exceptions were two evening papers, the *Express* and the *Daily News*. The *Express* was established in June, 1836, under the editorship of James Brooks and his brother, Erastus, graduates of the *Advertiser* of Portland, Me. It was devoted to Whig politics and the shipping of New York. The *Daily News* took no considerable part in journalism until twenty-five years later, when Benjamin Wood bought it.

In other parts of the country the 1 cent newspaper, properly conducted, met with the favor which the public had showered upon Ben Day. William M. Swain, who has been mentioned as a fellow compositor with Ben Day and who tried to dissuade his friend from the folly of starting THE SUN, saw the wisdom of the penny paper and saw also that the New York field was filled. He went to Philadelphia and established the *Public Ledger*, the first issue appearing on March 25, 1836. The *Ledger* was not the first penny sheet to be published in Philadelphia, the *Daily Transcript* having preceded it by a few days. These two newspapers soon consolidated, however.

Swain's *Ledger* was at once sensational and brave. It came out for the abolition of slavery, and its office was twice mobbed. It was mobbed again in 1844, during the Native American riots. Swain was a big, hard working man. George W. Childs, his successor as proprietor of the *Ledger*, wrote of him that for twenty years it was his habit to read every paragraph that went into the paper. Swain made $3,000,000 out of the *Ledger*; but when, during the civil war, the cost of paper compelled nearly all the newspapers to advance prices, he tried to keep the *Ledger* at 1 cent, and lost $100,000 within a year. Childs, who had been a newsdealer and book publisher, bought the paper from Swain in 1864, and raised its price to 2 cents.

When Swain went to Philadelphia he had two partners, Arunah S. Abell and Azariah H. Simmons, both printers, and, like Swain, former associates of Day. Simmons remained with Swain on the *Ledger* until his death in 1855, but Abell—the man who poked more fun than anybody else at Day for his penny SUN idea—went to Baltimore and there established a *Sun* of his own, the first copy coming out on May 17, 1837. It was a success from the start. How well it paid Abell to follow Ben Day's scheme may be judged by the fact that thirty years later Abell bought Guilford, a splendid estate near Baltimore, and paid $475,000 for it.

Both Swain and Abell were friends of S. F. B. Morse, and they helped him to finance the electric telegraph. The Baltimore *Sun* published the famous message, "What hath God wrought?" sent over the wire from Washington to Baltimore on May 24, 1844, when the telegraph first came into practical use. Abell was the sole proprietor of the Baltimore *Sun* from 1837 to 1887. He died in 1888 at the age of 82.

Other important newspapers started in the ten years that followed Day's founding of THE SUN were the Detroit *Free Press*, the St. Louis *Republic*, the New Orleans *Picayune*, the Burlington *Hawkeye*, the Hartford *Times*, the New York *Tribune*, the Brooklyn *Eagle*, the Cincinnati *Enquirer* and the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*.

In 1830 there were only 852 newspapers in the United States, which then had a population of 12,866,020, and these newspapers had a combined yearly circulation of 68,117,000 copies. Ten years later the population was 17,069,453, and there were 1,631 newspapers with a combined yearly circulation of 196,000,000 copies. In other words, while the population increased 32 per cent. in a decade, the total sale of newspapers increased 187 per cent. The inexpensive paper had found its readers.

In his report on newspapers for the census of 1880, S. N. D. North says that from 1830 to 1840—

By the sheer force of its superior circulation the penny press exerted the most powerful newspaper influence that was felt in the United States, and during this interval its beneficial influence was the most apparent. It taught the higher priced papers that political connection was properly subordinated to the other and higher function of the public journal—the function of gathering and presenting the news as it is, without reference to its political or other effect upon friend or foe.

The advent of the penny press concluded the transition period in American journalism and had three effects which are easily traceable. It increased the circulation, decreased the price of daily newspapers and changed the character of the reading matter published.

As Charles H. Levermore wrote in an article on the rise of metropolitan journalism in the *American Historical Review*:

Independent journalism, as represented first by THE SUN and the *Herald*, won a complete victory over old fashioned partisan journalism. The time had forever departed when an Albany regency could tune the press of the State as easily and simply as Queen Elizabeth used to tune the English pulpits. As James Parton said, "an editorial is only a man speaking to men, but the news is Providence speaking to men."

Thus Ben Day's SUN remade American journalism—more by accident than design, as he himself remarked at a dinner to Robert Hoe in 1851.

Later Life of "The Sun's" Founder.

It is evident that Day soon regretted the sale of THE SUN, for in 1840 he established a penny paper called the *True Sun*. This he presently sold for a fair price, but his itch for journalism did not disappear. He started the *Tatler*, but it was not a success. In 1842, in conjunction with James Wilson, he founded the monthly magazine, *Brother Jonathan*, which reprinted English double decker novels complete in one issue. This later became a weekly, and Day brought out illustrated editions semi-annually.

This was a new thing, at least in America, and Day may be called the originator of our illustrated periodicals as well as of our penny papers. His right hand men in the editing of *Brother Jonathan* were Nathaniel P. Willis, the poet, and Horatio H. Weld, who was first a printer, next an editor and at last a minister.

Day sold *Brother Jonathan* for a dollar a year. When the paper famine hit the publishing business in 1862 he suspended his publication and retired from business. He was well off, and he spent the remaining twenty-seven years of his life in ease at his New York home. He died on December 21, 1889. His son Benjamin was the inventor of the Ben Day process used in making engravings.

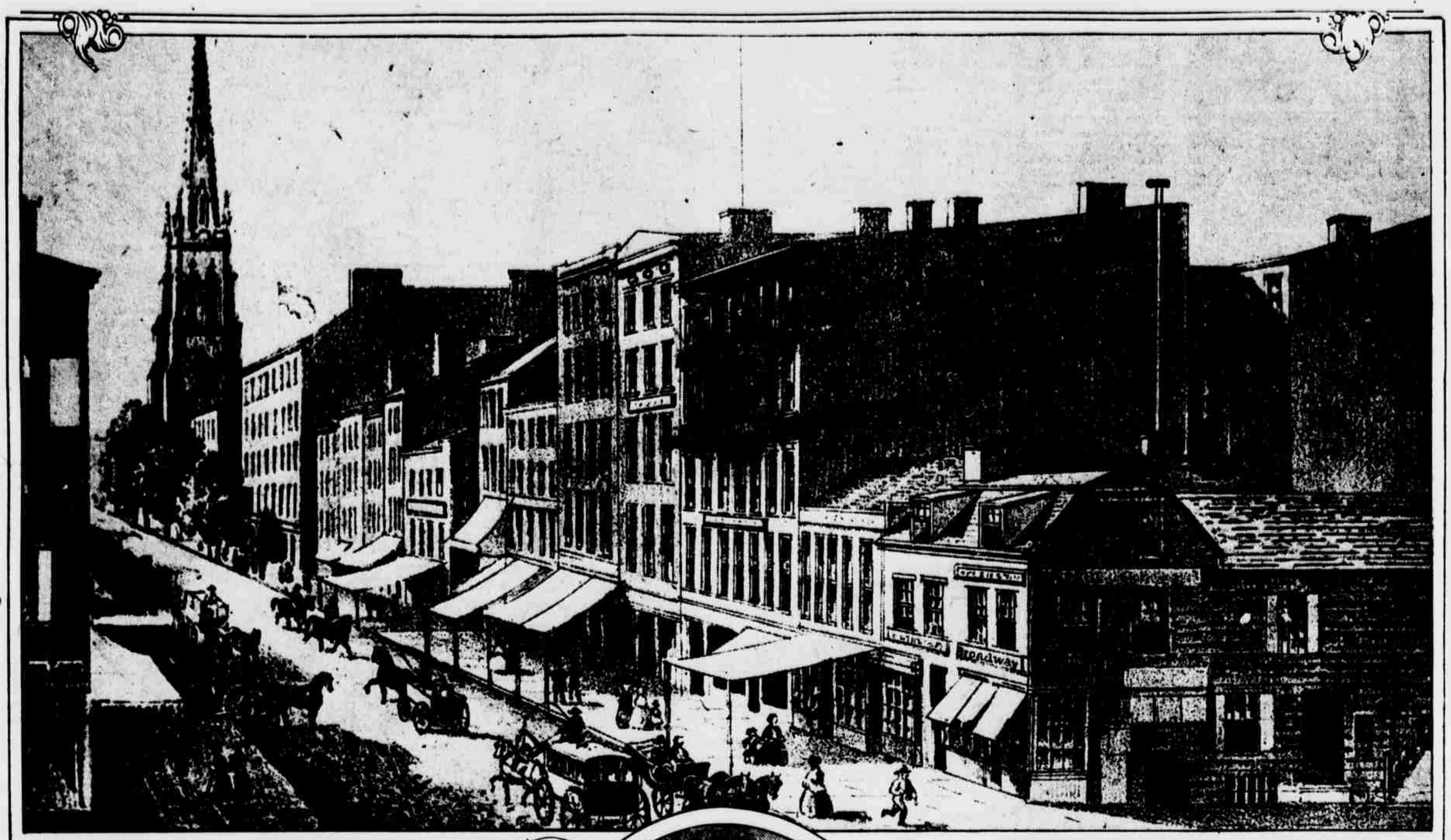
Day always watched the fortunes of THE SUN with interest, but he did not believe that his immediate successors ran it just the right way. When the paper passed into the hands of Charles A. Dana, in 1868, Day, then not yet threescore—said:

"He'll make a newspaper of it!"

And it was then he added that the silliest thing he himself ever did was to sell THE SUN.

To be continued in next Sunday's SUN.

Former Owner Reenters Business and Originates Illustrated Periodicals, but He Always Regretted Selling THE SUN, Calling Such Action "Silliest Thing I Ever Did"



A VIEW OF BROADWAY IN THE LATE 30'S FROM MAIDEN LANE

MOSES Y. BEACH, SECOND OWNER OF THE SUN
From a picture in the possession of Mrs Jennie Beach Gasper.

THE THIRD HOME OF THE SUN WAS AT NASSAU and FULTON STREETS — THE BUILDING IS SHOWN HERE AT THE LEFT.